OCCASIONS FOR READING: SOME THOUGHTS ON SECONDARY ENGLISH SYLLABUS REFORM

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In a recent review of the Higher School Certificate in New South Wales (Green Paper)[1] many far-reaching reforms were suggested. This paper is prompted by debates conducted in the media, in professional arenas and elsewhere about those reforms, particularly as they relate to English in the secondary school.

I would like to preface my comments with a 'story' about my own involvement in the process of a review of post-compulsory education in the form of syllabus writing in the late 1980s. It may be the case that teachers now – having experienced almost a decade of unrelenting educational change in Australia – are more familiar with the intricacies of syllabus construction than I was at the time of working on the Year 12 Literature syllabus in Western Australia. At that time I realised very quickly how little I knew about the processes for producing the documents that governed my classroom life, and that very few of my teaching colleagues knew anything about the processes either.

As a doctoral student in Western Australia with several years' experience teaching English in high schools, I was employed by the then Secondary Education Authority to 'write' a new Year 12 syllabus for English Literature. The policy circumstances leading to this event were not unlike those recently encountered by educators and administrators in New South Wales. The State government, faced with dramatic increases and diversification in the composition of school populations, had commissioned a Review, subsequently referred to as 'The Beazley Report' and delivered in 1984. This Report, in conjunction with a related report, referred to as 'The McGaw Report' (1984), prompted a range of policy changes which affected every level of schooling in Western Australia.

The impetus for the Western Australian Inquiry 'was government concern about the relevance of existing patterns and provisions of primary, secondary and technical and further education in Western Australia to present community conditions and foreseeable future circumstances' (p.1). One of the terms of reference for the Beazley Committee was 'the adequacy of present certification arrangements for students proceeding through schools and the extent to which tertiary admission requirements should be adjusted to enable the curriculum to be diversified to meet the needs of the widest possible community' (p.xiii). No doubt all of this sounds very familiar to teachers in New South Wales but one direct effect of the 1984 Western Australian recommendations for adjustments to tertiary admissions requirements was that the general but compulsory subject, English, was not only dropped as a requirement for university entry but was also made redundant. Students could no longer count their examination score in English towards their tertiary entrance aggregate; they could only count their score in the 'optional' tertiary entrance subject, English Literature. This meant that students could gain a tertiary entrance score which did not include any score from an English subject. Although this situation has undergone several adjustments since then and English has been

[1] Department of Training and Education co-ordination New South Wales (1996). Green Paper: Their Future, Options for reform of the Higher School Certificate. http://www.dtec.nsw.gov.au

gradually reinstated as a 'counting' subject in the tertiary entrance stakes it still does not occupy its pre-Beazley/McGaw status.

On handing down the Beazley Report it was noted that English had been singled out for special attention.

> The committee decided, because of time limitations, not to investigate the detailed syllabuses of existing 'core' subjects. However, it was obliged by evidence to waive this decision to some extent in regard to the teaching of English. The Committee believed that the relative generality of the English syllabus also provided justification for some closer examination of this subject. (p.144, 2.139)

In view of what the Committee considered to be serious problems associated with the teaching of English in high schools, a discussion paper was circulated during the time of the inquiry and feedback sought from the community. The paper suggested, among other things, that:

> there is insufficient relevance in the upper school curriculum to practical situations and contemporary life; the teaching of English is too closely tied to the teaching of literature; too much emphasis is being placed on literary and creative objectives. (p.145, 2.139)

Again, although we are now sixteen years down the track from the Beazley/McGaw exercises in Western Australia these observations about English will sound familiar to teachers in other states which have undergone similar reviews.

In the fall-out that followed the release of the Beazley Report and the McGaw Report and the implementation of many of their recommendations, the English syllabi from K to 12 were rewritten. English Literature was, and still is, offered as one of a range of English subjects available to students in upper secondary school.

The process for producing the English Literature syllabus was as follows. A committee was convened by the Secondary Education Authority representative of the English education community in Western Australia, including the (then) four universities and teachers from State, Catholic, and Independent Schools among others. At each meeting ideas would be debated, proposals put forward and contested, and details of syllabus structure and assessment worked out. At the end of each meeting I would go away with pages of notes and write a section of the syllabus in line with what appeared to be a consensus arrived at during the meeting. If I could not divine a consensus on a particular issue I would simply write a section of the syllabus along what I took to be sensible lines in terms of classroom practice, and put it up for debate at the next meeting. Whatever emerged from that debate helped to reshape the section and I then moved onto the next piece of the syllabus. The aim was to produce a document that would meet the sectionalised theoretical interests of the university representatives and that the teacher representatives would agree was workable.

Finally, the document was completed and agreed upon by the committee, with strong reservations from some teacher representatives, and was released for comment with a view to further amendments in line with community response. The process of response and amendment was lively but not particularly protracted. The important point is that amendments were carried out in order to make the document more appealing to those sections of the English teaching community

which had provided some harsh criticisms of it, and as a result of these 'compromises' a 'new' Year 12 English Literature syllabus was implemented the following year.

When I had taken on the job of writing this version of the Year 12 English Literature syllabus, I was equipped as a member of the English teaching corps with the following ideas about English as a subject: I assumed that English was under attack (that is how it appeared at the time) by the Beazley and McGaw committees because no one on the Committee understood the complexities of English teaching. They weren't aware, for instance, of the impossibility of 'measuring' something as diverse as English, or of specifying in advance the requirements of a subject with such mixed elements, such broad demands on its time and organisation. The Committee appeared to expect English teachers to simplify this diversity, to package, break it up into component parts, sequence it, define its goals (and ultimately its 'outcomes'), to synthesise what were, in effect, contradictory demands within English to produce autonomous learners while at the same time providing 'basic' literacy skills. It is now twenty-five years since Bruce Bennett and John Hay confidently asserted that 'it is little wonder that debates about where the emphasis in English teaching should fall are never concluded, and highly desirable that they never should be. To continue them is to provide an essential service to the subject and to those who teach it' (p.xi). Although I question the nature of this 'essential service' in current terms, this type of sentiment continued to inform my thinking about English at the time of my involvement in syllabus restructuring.

It had seemed apparent from my reading in the field of English education that the way to address the central concerns over the competing elements of the subject was through the provision of a unifying theoretical overview – something that would bind the diverse aspects of English and would provide a theoretical coherence hitherto absent from most accounts. My reading of various histories of English tended to reinforce my belief in the need for some kind of agreement within the field on theory. English was organised, these histories asserted, around quasi-theoretical models such as 'heritage', personal growth', 'skills', and 'cultural studies'. The focus of most debates was on how these various models worked either in opposition to one another or as complementary approaches.

In my role as 'secretary' for the syllabus writing committee I not only learnt a great deal about how these documents actually get produced but I also learnt some important lessons about what can be called 'governmentality', following the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault uses the term 'governmentality' to refer to all of those practices, procedures, techniques, and strategies that modern states have developed for governing or disciplining national populations. Words such as 'government' and 'discipline' with their implications of imposed outcomes appear somewhat antithetical to the interests of English teachers. Generally we have had such good training provided by Humanities Faculties in the free-wheeling, critical, resistant, self-reflective, hermeneutic practices typical of our fields of study (usually literature and the social sciences) that a term such as governmentality triggers a rush to its assumed and endangered opposite, 'freedom'. Those of us who attended universities in the early 70s, who served on moratorium committees, marched against everything from rugby tours to tree felling, did leaflet drops for the 'It's time' campaign, and read the radical and beat literature of the US while campaigning for more Oz Lit in the curriculum are not always sympathetic to the corps of expert administrators and bureaucrats who oversee the design and implementation of specific policy changes in the public education sector.

The resistance of English personnel to bureaucratic manoeuvres is almost legendary. Most versions of professional journals in the English field bear witness to the ways in which we so expertly and consistently adopt the mantle of critique. We see ourselves as the group traditionally opposed to the administrators, bureaucrats, and politicians and therefore best able to ask the tough questions of them. Our distrust of empiricism and our anti-positivist stances are legacies of an education in self-reflective, critical practices, and since empiricism, rationality, and positivism are some of the features of governmentality, the administrators, bureaucrats and politicians become a rather easy target for our concerns. But, as Bruce Wilson has commented, academics and teachers need not complain about 'the modernist project of conquest through rational planning and action' because, 'That dreadful project has already visited on us such evils as compulsory education, universal entitlement to medical treatment, and systems of social welfare, public transport, sewerage, and drainage' (p.20). In short, we would be in a serious state of social disarray without the formidable set of governmental strategies daily deployed on our behalf, and which we, as an expert body of educators, daily deliver in educational institutions.

So, although it is tempting to hold to the ideal of a forward march towards a future where complete social freedom and personal liberation, unfettered by the ministrations of 'government' is a possibility, the actuality, as Foucault spent so much time reminding us, is much more mundane. 'Government', 'rationality' or whatever we want to call it is not on the opposite side to democracy, freedom of expression, self development and so on. 'Government' (not to be confused with 'The Government') remains a necessary part of, not the 'other' of, these cherished social and personal arrangements.

Once in the position of 'writer of the syllabus' I had to abandon the belief that theory was the launching pad for a model of English that would meet the needs of the discipline for a coherent philosophy, or for a theoretically coherent 'position'. Agreement on theoretical issues was clearly impossible. The committee was riven on the issue of theory with sectional interests, opposing viewpoints, entrenched positions, and in some cases bitter personal rivalry taking centre stage. In the interests of peace and progress we had to abandon any pretence of achieving theoretical coherence. In fact, I had to let go of my belief that syllabus production was driven by a combination of theory and practical principle. Instead, we worked in a piecemeal and pragmatic way to devise a syllabus that would include elements that most English teachers would recognise and feel comfortable with and that most English academics would acknowledge as having some value (even if they were opposed to the particular approach on principle), and that would also introduce some 'new' approaches. The 'new' approaches were, in the main, based in cultural studies and informed by poststructural theory and these were introduced alongside other, more recognisable, techniques and strategies.

It is likely that a focus on theoretical 'models' is not very helpful in understanding or governing the institution of English. However, this type of focus is endemic in the review and inquiry fields. A good example is the wide-ranging, thorough, and, in most ways, insightful view of the preservice preparation of English and literacy teachers resulting from a project of national significance funded by the then Department of Employment Education and Training and chaired by Francis Christie. Published in 1991 this project (referred to here as 'The Christie Report'), provided the first extensive overview of the preparation of English and literacy teachers in Australia and it remains a significant contribution to knowledge in this field. However, it is not unlike many of its relatives in the review

and inquiry fields in its focus on different 'models' of English education. It provides a detailed discussion of four models which it identifies as 'skills', 'heritage', 'personal growth', and 'critical social literacy' (p.xii). This last was the model which the project advanced as offering the best hope of a theoretically coherent and socially equitable approach to English and literacy education. Indeed 'the main thrust of this Report is to argue for the development of a *critical social literacy*, both in teacher education and in schools' (p.xi).

Although most reviews of English education focus on the issue of models, and in more recent times on the issue of accountability through assessment practices, the issue of pedagogy is rarely addressed. The Christie Report did list pedagogy as one of its concerns (p.101) but did not engage with it beyond reiterating a preferred teaching style (p.103). The current review of the New South Wales HSC is similarly silent on the issue of pedagogy. The use of theoretical models as the organising principle of the institution of English results in a tendency for reviews to assume that these are the foundation of the discipline rather than the effects of intersecting sets of governmental strategies for organising an institution such as English.

Reviews of English are traditionally located within a history and theory of the subject which do not provide a very useful guide to understanding its constitution. Instead, English has maintained a tenacious historical continuity with a set of ancient pedagogical practices – practices which date from early Christian pastoral traditions and from which it has withstood successive attempts to redefine its territory. This longevity of tradition and its accompanying conservatism could be considered a good thing by some of our colleagues. After all, if English has been able to survive in its present form for such a long time then what is the problem? Why all these reviews and rewritings of syllabus, and reconstructions of assessment structures and so on? The simple reply given by more than just educational bureaucrats and politicians representing both sides of the political fence is that English is falling seriously short of meeting new demands.[2] The questions that were asked in Western Australia almost seventeen years ago have not gone away. The first set of questions related to accountability. If English professionals cannot or will not say what it is they do in their classrooms, and what it is that they expect their students to do – in measurable terms – then how do we account for English as a required subject? How do we justify a huge public expenditure on a subject that does not appear to be able to articulate or demonstrate its function? The second set of questions focuses on the relationship between literature study and English. Is a literature-based English program the best option for preparing students in the late twentieth century for the range and diversity of literacy practices that will be demanded of them in higher education and in the workplace? One possible answer to these questions is that the expenditure is warranted on altruistic grounds; that since all things cannot be measured and many very worthwhile ventures remain outside of the accountants' gaze, then we should continue to fund English for its own sake.

But can we maintain that line – indeed, do we want to maintain it, in view of the evidence that students in New South Wales have steadily deserted the literature-based subjects? In a somewhat understated presentation, Barry McGaw on the (November, 1996) SDBS program EdTV, showed graphs tracking the take-up by students in New South Wales of English subjects over the past decade. Because there has been a huge increase in retention rates over that period the expectation would be that subjects would attract more students. However, it appeared from the data that

[2] For a detailed discussion of new demands and changing times for schools and students see chapter 4 of the Green Pater: Their Future: Options for Reform of the Higher School Certificate. http://www.dtec.nsw.au

students have not chosen to study the literature-based subjects, 2 Unit General and 3 Unit General. On the contrary, enrolments in those subjects have steadily declined over the past decade, in contrast with the steady increase in enrolments in the language-based subject, Contemporary English. This may not be very surprising because the literature-based subjects are thought to be the more demanding of the subjects offered and we might prefer to assume that students are choosing the easiest options. If that were the case, McGaw argues, then we might expect a corresponding decline in the more demanding mathematics subjects over the same time. But according to the data, that decline did not occur. Although McGaw did not draw conclusions from the data, the fact that he presented them in this comparative way suggests criticism of the arrangement of English subjects in New South Wales. It is also a caution for English teachers. What the data – and McGaw's philosophical shrug as he presented them – suggested is that the statistical indicators of falling demand are available, the arguments against English have been assembled, and English needs to respond in a way that is not repetitively dismissive of criticism, nor predictably disdainful of governmental processes.[3]

One way of responding to the challenges to English is to consider the effects of continuing to follow a history of English which locates the genesis of the subject in a nineteenth century combination of progressive educational philosophy and literary cultivation. One of the detrimental effects of this admittedly powerful focus on history and theory is a circularity of argument that English must be retained because it is essential, and therefore it must be retained. This is a rather weak argument to counter claims of redundancy of the subject. One of the first points the Green Paper makes is the following:

> One thing that all students in upper secondary education have in common is that they have no formal obligation to be there...Anything that New South Wales wants to achieve for all of its young people through schooling needs to have been dealt with by year 10. It would still be possible to have a 'core' of the curriculum shared by all who stay on to years 11-12 *but the justification cannot lie in that core being essential for everyone*. (Introduction, Chapter 1; emphasis added)

> And a little further on:

> It is possible that whatever the mix of courses individual students choose, some common goals might be achieved, such as the development of general skills in communication, planning and organising, and working with others. These general goals might well be of sufficient important to be declared and monitored but they will be on the margin and not in the core of students' study. Reaching them is most likely to be an incidental consequence of reaching other, more specific and substantial goals of learning in the courses chosen. (Introduction, Chapter 1)

The traditional rationales for English which emphasise the subject's contributions to the creative, expressive, and intellectual development of individuals and communities, and its potential for empowering individuals and communities for political self-realisation may be misleading in their appeal to principles of freedom or equality.[4] Hunter certainly provides many pressing historical

[4] Moon, B (1994) Rethinking Resistance: English and Critical Consciousness, Interpretations 7, (3), 48-69, provided a compelling account of the alignment of 'models' of English with the concept of 'resistance'.

reasons for questioning the continuing appeal of English to theoretical, philosophical and literary principles. English, he claims, emerged as a combination of a pastoral, child-centred, morally formative approach to teaching and the inculcation of particular ethical capacities, alongside drilling in specific linguistic and rhetorical formulae. As Denise Meredyth (1994) noted in a thoughtful paper on the relationship between civics education and English: 'English, it seems, is a rare and peculiar means for forming a patchwork range of ethical and literate capacities' (p.74), and this is its strength. Hunter provides a different explanation from that traditionally offered through a view of the subject as being located in emancipatory or liberal progressive principles or models. While English remains mortgaged to these ideals, the possibility of beginning the task of detailing the morally normative elements, as well as the normative literate elements of our routine pedagogy seems remote.

Although the back to basics call and re-runs of the literacy crises are a regular feature of public debate and have been for as long as publicly-funded schooling has been available, the implications of the state education reviews that have taken place since the early 80s are not so much that English is not teaching literacy skills well enough, or that it is not teaching the right kinds of skills. The various reviews have not been concerned with the question of literacy standards, and the Green Paper is no exception. In each case, the focus of the review has been on the adequacy or otherwise of English to meet new demands generated by a range of factors including substantial changes in the composition of students staying on to complete Year 12, and by technological changes and changes in employment patterns for post-compulsory students. One question posed by most of the state reviews conducted over the past fifteen years is the ability of a literature-based English course to meet these new demands, but especially, of its suitability to meet the needs of late twentieth century students' for a diverse repertoire of reading/viewing, writing, listening and speaking skills. It is not that literature is considered inadequate to the task of meeting these new demands, it is more a question of whether or not a literature-based course (in its present form) is equal to the task of meeting these new demands for the majority of the student cohort required by curricula organisation and tertiary entrance requirements to study it. As Paul Nay-Brock (1988) pointed out, the war between 'literature' and 'language' in the Senior English curriculum has a very long history in New South Wales, and has been driven by the agendas of various Professors of English at the University of Sydney. Although this interpretation may impute more power to this group than is warranted, it does indicate the continuing tensions within English and preoccupations of English teachers. This difficulty over the balance between what have been nominated as, quite curiously, the separate categories of 'literature' and 'language' has combined with the difficulty of both specifying and demonstrating the requirements of the subject. While English is tied to a particular form of literary study, one which prides itself on its immeasurability, and above all, its unteachability[5], English will have difficulty at the school level in maintaining its claim to be a required subject.

English has a much longer history than the traditional claims of its emergence in the eighteenth century, and contrary to many neo-Marxist histories it did not emerge from a combination of progressive educational philosophy and literary cultivation (Hunter, 1988). Rather, the specific features of a child-centred English (so well identified by John Dixon's Growth through

[5] For a discussion of the imperative 'to teach and yet not to teach' in the secondary English classroom see Mellor, B. & A. Patterson (1994). The Reading Lesson. *Interpretations* 27, (3), 20-47.

English) emerged, instead, from an eighteenth century refashioning of an ancient, church-based, pastoral pedagogy relocated and transformed within the newly emergent governmental practices attached to eighteenth century nation states. The currently recognisable, ethical comportment of the English teacher (sympathetic, and working within the carefully crafted domain of surveillance and person formation) was fashioned as part of a set of pedagogical blueprints for popular education in the early nineteenth century as popular, or state-funded education began to take shape in England (Hunter, 1988; 1994). Progressive pedagogical theories and practices are, in effect, by-products of these governmental developments. The problem is that they are often mistaken for foundations.

This point probably requires some elaboration. Reviews, inquiries, histories, syllabus documents, curricula which are concerned with the discipline of English in schools, are currently located within a series of models or approaches. These models have had wide currency in the United Kingdom and Australia. They are a convenient anchor point for discussion and they allow the construction of syllabi which consciously aim to include aspects of each model in an attempt to cover the recognisable ground of English. The English Stage 6 syllabus is no exception to this general 'rule'. They also camouflage the existing unproductive confusion of linguistic capacities with particular forms of conduct. Ian Hunter (1991) has argued, however, that a more productive focus for 'reviews' of English would be the pedagogy of English, rather than its assumed 'models', or its theoretical positions. If we were to reinstate pedagogy at the centre of the review process, Hunter argues, then we would have a pedagogical context for whatever preferred approach we hoped to promote. Reaching agreement on a 'preferred' approach might be a difficult task, although, if I take a broad church view of current arrangements it appears that a (very generally termed) sociolinguistic approach has currency in many state senior English syllabi.

The second objective which might be achieved by the provision of a pedagogical context for English would be the separation of (literary) linguistic skills from ethical training. We know very little in research terms about the ethically formative role of English, and this will possibly continue to be the case for as long as we fail to discriminate between linguistic abilities and ethical formation through our endless reframing of English in terms of theoretical models. There is not much point in criticising the literary bias of the linguistic skills required by English and of criticising the 'aesthetic' forms of the ethical abilities promoted in English classrooms, as successive reviews and reports have done this over the past fifteen years, and as many histories of English continue to do from a basis of ideology critique. Rather, the review process needs to treat these as discrete sets of capacities by placing them in the context of their separate functions within social requirements for specific kinds of competence: literary/literacy and ethical. We can renovate English syllabi by providing the possibility of a separation between the development of linguistic capacities and those capacities tied to specific forms of conduct (ethical capacities), but it seems unlikely that we will achieve much more than this possibility unless we also transform pedagogical practices, which means transforming the English classroom and its personnel.

The recent review of the New South Wales HSC provides opportunities for English to define the literate, ethical, morally formative capacities which it has promoted so well since its emergence as part of state education. Instead of treating with suspicion the normative English pedagogical practices which structure as impressive range of ethical and literate capacity for English students, we

may do better to look at ways of detailing – in a more pragmatic sense – the morally formative, disciplinary dimensions of the English teacher's work in classrooms.

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